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2015

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Publication Details

Cahill, R. (2015). Revisiting a struggle: Port Kembla, 1938. *Recorder*, (282), 7-9.

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Revisiting a struggle: Port Kembla, 1938

Abstract

Rowan Cahill ruminates on the premiere screening of the documentary film *Pig Iron Bob* (Why Documentaries: Sandra Pires, Producer and Director) in Wollongong, 21 March 2015

Keywords

struggle, revisiting, port, 1938, kembla

Disciplines

Arts and Humanities | Law

Publication Details

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Revisiting a struggle – Port Kembla 1938

Rowan Cahill

I first met legendary Australian left-wing journalist Rupert Lockwood (1908-1997) in 1969. He had not long returned from a lengthy journalistic assignment in Moscow, and was in the process of leaving the Communist Party of Australia, which he had joined in 1939. We became friends, and eventually I wrote an account of his life and work. Meeting Rupert was, for me, an eye-opener in many ways. In his time Rupert had been a well-connected journalist with a great deal of insider knowledge and access to leaks. Listening to his accounts of Australian politics and history was like travelling with Dr Who through an alternative politico-historical universe; same key people and events, but hugely different with loads of forgotten/ignored characters and working people with agency. In his accounts were the seeds of my versions of, and approaches to, 'radical history'.

One story that got me hooked was his account of an event in Canberra, December 1938, on the eve of the parliamentary Christmas break. The previous month, Port Kembla waterside workers (wharfies) on the south coast of NSW had placed a ban on the loading of an Australian export cargo of 'pig-iron' on the British steamer Dalfram, bound for Japan. Their action, they explained, was in protest against the Sino-Japanese war, in progress since July 1937, and they did not want to assist the Japanese war effort.

Further, they argued, war between Japan and Australia was a distinct future possibility, in which case Australia could well be on the receiving end of strategic materials it exported to Japan. The conservative Lyons government, in accord with its policy of appeasement and friendship towards Japan, denounced the ban, arguing the wharfies were trying to dictate foreign policy, the preserve of the government.

Attorney General Robert Menzies (hatefully dubbed 'Pig-Iron Bob' by the wharfies) vigorously sought to end the ban, eventually deploying the harsh provisions of the *Transport Workers Act* against the wharfies, bringing a bleak Christmas to them and their families, and to the local community which largely supported them, and permanently threatening their long-term employment. At various times during the 1930s, Menzies expressed his admiration for the public order and anti-trade union solutions of Mussolini and Hitler.

The Port Kembla dispute became the focus of national attention until its resolution with a compromise in January 1939. Its achievements were political, placing the politics and foreign policy of the conservative government under scrutiny in a way they had previously escaped. It also added the tactic of 'political strike' to the arsenal of the Australian trade union movement, one that would be later deployed with great international effect in the 1946-49 bans by Australian unions which prevented vital Dutch shipping and strategic supplies leaving Australian ports during the struggle for Indonesian independence from Dutch colonial rule.

In 1938, Rupert Lockwood was a young *Melbourne Herald* journalist, a rising star in the burgeoning press empire of Sir Keith Murdoch, and a senior galleryman. But he was leftish in sympathies. He had not long returned from a lengthy roving assignment abroad, reporting from Asia and Europe. In China he had seen the Japanese invasion up close and personal. He had visited Nazi Germany. More recently he had been under fire, reporting sympathetically from the Republican lines of the Spanish Civil War.

In the December sitting of Parliament before the Christmas break Lockwood watched and listened as quixotic Labor MP Maurice Blackburn made an eloquent and stirring speech in support of the Port Kembla wharfies and their ban. Blackburn was a politician Lockwood admired and respected, in his estimation a parliamentary rarity, a democrat in theory and practice, and a person who remained true to his principles no matter what.

Blackburn told the House the action taken by the wharfies' will have the sympathy, silent support, and as far as possible, active support of the people of this country, and not only the working class. I believe that the Government is making a gigantic mistake in attacking these men'.

The speech touched Lockwood deeply. And Lockwood agreed with the arguments of the wharfies. His experiences in Asia had led him to believe war with Japan was inevitable. Subsequently, at the Canberra press gallery's annual break-up dinner, Lockwood, as a senior galleryman, was called upon to toast the guest, Attorney General Menzies. Both men had attended the same elite Melbourne private school; both came from the same part of rural Victoria; their fathers knew one another; both were gifted public speakers.

In his toast Lockwood caustically congratulated Menzies for his humanitarianism in recognising the lack of iron in the diet of the Chinese people and his efforts to rectify this deficiency via the bomb racks of Japanese aircraft. Scuffles between journalists erupted as a consequence of the toast. Lockwood was assaulted, other journalists joined the affray, blood was shed. Menzies was livid.

The rest is history. Menzies contacted his political ally, Murdoch, and expressed displeasure regarding Lockwood. Murdoch ordered Lockwood to toe the line, which Lockwood refused, thus extinguishing his status as a rising star. Menzies, derisively and widely known henceforth as 'Pig-Iron Bob', an appellation that upset him, eventually went on to become Australian Prime Minister (1949-1966), and was regarded as an icon by conservatives. Lockwood went on to become an iconic leftist journalist, eventually throwing his lot in with the wharfies, editing the *Maritime Worker*, journal of the Waterside Workers' Federation (WWF) of Australia, for thirty years. Both men remained implacable lifetime foes. Lockwood's account of the Port Kembla ban, *War on the Waterfront* (1987), is well worth reading.

All this came vividly to mind on Saturday night (March 21), in Wollongong Town Hall, not far from the port where the Dalfram was delayed for over two-months in 1938/39. I, and some 800 others, were there to see the premiere screening of the new film by producer and director Sandra Pires, *Pig Iron Bob* (Why Documentaries, 2015).

For her sympathetic film about the Dalfram dispute, lovingly crafted over some five years and financed on a small budget, Pires recreated scenes, interviewed survivors, travelled to China and sites of the rapacious brunt of Japanese militarism, and liberated rare footage from archives. Her film also pays due credit to the leader of the dispute, Ted Roach, just turned twenty-nine years of age, his lifelong activism often under / downplayed by historians.

Ted Roach (1909-1997) had been elected to office earlier in 1938 as Secretary of the South Coast Branch of the WWF. Born in the small coal-mining community of Coledale north of Port Kembla, subsequently raised in the steel-town of Newcastle, he had left school at 13, and was something of a pugilist, having attended a local gym; one of his brothers became an Australian featherweight champion. Various itinerant worker, steelworker, cane-cutter, political organiser, wharfie, Roach was a believer in the philosophy of direct action. In later life he served two prison terms for his radicalism, including a long stretch in solitary, and was one of the national leaders of the WWF between 1942-67. During 1946-49, Roach was prominent in the leadership of the Indonesian independence solidarity bans by Australian unions against Dutch imperialism, having learned the ropes, so to speak, in Port Kembla with the Dalfram.

Thank you, Sandra Pires, for a great piece of film making, a wonderful tribute to a principled moment in Australian history, and a reminder of what a relative 'handful' of ordinary people, 180 workers in this case, and a supportive community, can do when they put conscience above profiteering and what passes for 'law: and for the glimpse of something that tends to be excised from national narratives of the 1930s - a reprehensible Australian ruling class, elements of which were treacherously comfortable with, and accommodating towards, Japanese militarism and imperialism.

Rowan's thesis on Lockwood can be read at <http://ro.uow.edu.au/theses/3942>